

**Living with Death and Dying with God in the New World:
The Reflections of Samuel Sewall and William Byrd II**

An Honors Thesis (HONORS 499)

by

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Abstract

The diaries and other writings of William Byrd II of Virginia and Samuel Sewall of Massachusetts provide today's reader with much knowledge about late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century life in England's American colonies. In particular, this project examines how the lives and worldviews of these two men were affected by regional differences, with a focus on how life, death, medicine, disease and faith are reflected in their writings. First, brief biographies of both men are given, followed by an explanation of the cultural context and socio-economic position of each man. This introductory information is followed by an overview of medical practices of the colonial world, reflections from Byrd and Sewall on the subject, and their dietary and exercise practices. Next, after a summary of types of colonial medical practitioners, there are given personal anecdotes from both men on the subject, with special emphasis on folk medicine and the search for a panacea in the early-modern world. Following this, the reality of death in the lives of Byrd and Sewall, who both lost wives and children prematurely, is discussed. Finally, a look at both men's reflections on their own mortality, with emphasis on their reliance on religion, is offered. Ultimately, Byrd and Sewall's similar yet contrasting views on God and his role, both direct and indirect, in the bodies of humanity offers some insight into the differences in regional colonial cultures and the worldview of seventeenth and eighteenth century British colonial Americans.

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The diaries of Samuel Sewall of Massachusetts and William Byrd II of Virginia provide historians of colonial America and the early modern world unparalleled access to the mind of the British colonial elite of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Although much has been written about each man's life and work, they are rarely directly compared, though each was of comfortable means and lived during the same period. An assessment of both men's diaries, in addition to providing and illustrating important general points of contrast between the regional colonial cultures of New England and the Old South, alerts the reader to the significance of life and death for each man and each society. The personal reflections of Byrd and Sewall found in their diaries and letters are filled with references to the ever-present specters of illness, physical decay, and premature death that often dominated their thoughts. However, because they felt God's punishing hand was always so near, each man tried to fully enjoy life while looking to their deep Christian faith to counsel them and validate what was happening around them. In the quest to understand the role of life and death in the colonial American world, their writings, representing the division between the northern and southern cultures and between country estate and town, allow the historian a deeply personal connection with past and its sometimes startling realities. Before proceeding any further, brief biographies of Samuel Sewall and William Byrd II are necessary.

Samuel Sewall was born 28 March 1652 in Bishop Stoke, Hampshire, England "a little before Day-break." In 1659, Samuel's father, Henry, sailed to Massachusetts to visit his father, who was already living there. Soon after, Samuel says, "my Father sent for my Mother to come to him in New England."¹ Arriving in 1661, Sewall was sent to school for six years, after which he was admitted "into the College" of Harvard. There he completed his "first Degree" in 1671

¹ M. Halsley Thomas, ed., *The Diary of Samuel Sewall: 1674-1729*. 2 vol (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), xxxi.

and his Master's in 1674. Returning home to Newbury, Massachusetts, Samuel courted and married Hannah Hull, his "dear Wife," in 1676, and the newlyweds had their first child, John, in 1677.² Although he had contemplated becoming a minister, soon after his marriage he began a partnership with his father-in-law, John Hull, who was a successful merchant in Boston. Biographer T. B. Strandness calls Samuel's decision to abandon his theological pursuits and take up commerce as exemplary of the "triumph of wealth in the Puritan community and the movement away from the pulpit as a seat of power."³

As a man of comfortable means, Sewall served in various government positions while pursuing commercial and agricultural interests. He managed the printing press in Boston from 1681 to 1684, and was a member of the Court of Assistants and the Board of Overseers of Harvard from 1684 through 1686 and, after traveling to England to protest the revoking of the Massachusetts charter, again from 1689 until 1691. From 1691 until Sewall retired in 1725, he was a member of the Governing Council; also, he was justice and later chief justice of the Superior Court of Judicature from 1692 to 1728. Of special note was his service as a Commissioner of Oyer and Terminer (judge) at the famous Salem witchcraft trials of 1692.⁴ Also, Sewall was fond of pursuing his farming interests on the land he inherited from his and his wife's families, writing often in his diary about planting fruit and nut trees and harvesting crops.⁵

However, Sewall's family life was not as successful and enjoyable as his public career. Although he loved his wife and children dearly, his domestic life was punctuated by severe loss and immense personal tragedy. Of Sewall's fourteen children, seven died during infancy, and two of his daughters died late in his life. In addition, his first wife Hannah died in 1717, and his

² *Ibid.*, xxxii.

³ Theodore Benson Strandness, *Samuel Sewall: A Puritan Portrait* (Michigan State University Press, 1967), 44.

⁴ Thomas, ed., *Sewall Diary*, xxiv-xxvi.

⁵ Strandness, *Sewall: A Puritan Portrait*, 55.

second wife Abigail died in 1720, a few months after their marriage.⁶ After marrying his third wife, Mary, he led a quiet life and died at the ripe old age of seventy-eight in 1730.⁷

Sewall's Virginian contemporary William Byrd II was born on 28 March 1674 at the Byrd family plantation, Westover. Born into wealth, young William was sent to England at age seven for schooling at the Felsted Grammar School in Essex under the care of his maternal grandfather, Warham Horsemanden. There he learned Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and the classics, but, unlike Sewall, he did not pursue a university education in theology or some other subject. After finishing school, Byrd entered business training at Perry & Lane in London, and by 1695 he was admitted to the bar from the Middle Temple law school. In 1696, Byrd returned to Westover, but was back in London by 1697.⁸

Although enjoying life as a young London socialite, Byrd was called back to Virginia in 1704 after the sudden death of his father, William Byrd I. Heir to twenty-six thousand acres and a personal estate of fourteen hundred, the ideal Virginian country gentleman, Byrd quickly courted and married Lucy Parke, the vivacious and tempestuous daughter of the "rakish" Daniel Parke. They had two daughters, Evelyn and Wilhelmina, and two sons which, to the great heartache of William and Lucy, died in infancy.⁹ Although Byrd seems to have loved his wife dearly, they often quarreled over his fondness for other women, including once when he "kissed [Mrs. Chiswell] until she was angry and my wife also was uneasy about it" and another time when they "quarreled about [Lucy] pulling her brows."¹⁰ However, Byrd and his wife were also very close, taking evening walks and enjoying a passionate intimate life. During these relatively

⁶ Judith S Graham, *Puritan Family Life: The Diary of Samuel Sewall* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 20-21.

⁷ Thomas, ed., *Sewall Diary*, xxviii.

⁸ Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling, eds., *The London Diary (1717-1721) and Other Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 7-9, 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16-17, 26.

¹⁰ Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling, eds., *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1709-1712*

happy years at Westover, Byrd began his career as a public servant, taking his father's place on the Council of State in 1709 and serving as commander-in-chief of the militia of Henrico and Charles City counties.¹¹

Like Sewall, Byrd knew his share of personal tragedy. In 1714, Byrd set sail for England on business, leaving Lucy behind, but he sent for her to join him after two years had passed. However, they were only reunited for a short while; Lucy contracted smallpox and died in London soon after arriving. Staying in London, Byrd soon decided to remarry and tried to find a suitably rich heiress to make his wife. These years in London, from 1714 until 1719, and after a brief return to Virginia, again from 1722 through 1726, mark a time during which Byrd was tempted by the excesses of the big city, including womanizing and carousing. Finally, after years of searching for the perfect mate, he married Maria Taylor, the daughter of a prosperous gentleman of England, in 1724.¹²

Returning to Virginia in 1726, where he would stay until his death, Byrd and his new wife settled into the routine of plantation life at Westover. Maria gave William four more children, including a son, William, to inherit the Byrd estates. Byrd lived out the rest of his years in his best imitation of an English country squire, serving as a burgess and taking the odd government commission, including a mission to survey the border between Virginia and North Carolina in 1728, which he wrote about wittily in his book *History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*. He died in 1744, a man who was, according to Louis B. Wright, co-editor of Byrd's secret diaries, "exempl[ary] of [the] aristocracy that had been developing since the early days of [Virginia's] settlement" and whose career was "a revealing example of

(Richmond, Virginia: The Dietz Press, 1941), 101; Wright and Tinling, eds., *London Diary*, 20.

¹¹ Kenneth A. Lockridge, *The Diary, and Life, of William Byrd II of Virginia, 1674-1744* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), xiii; Wright and Tinling, eds., *London Diary*, 24.

¹² Lockridge, *The Diary, and Life*, xiii-xiv.

the rise of that influential agrarian aristocracy.” Although Byrd’s later years were relatively peaceful, he certainly never fully recovered from the losses of his wife and two of his children at the hand of disease.¹³

Byrd and Sewall both were men of colonial British America, yet they came from regions whose cultures, geographies, and demographics were quite different from each other. William Byrd came from recently established landed gentry in a society where, according to Virginian scholar Rhys Isaac, “[the] settlement pattern...generally did not include towns or even villages.”¹⁴ Population was sparse: in 1720, only 90,000 people lived in Virginia. This spread-out style of living was afforded because of the rich farmland of the Virginian coastal plain and semi-tropical weather that allowed an extended growing season; because of this, the various crops, predominantly tobacco, raised by wealthy planters drove the economy during the colonial period.¹⁵ Also, this primarily agrarian society produced conditions in which two types of maladies, slavery and disease, flourished.

The world of Samuel Sewall was very different from Byrd’s country idyll. Colonial New England was a village-based society where town meetings and personal interaction with one’s neighbors was expected. Faith and obedience to God was more prevalent, and strict Puritan Christianity was encouraged by the leaders of the colony to the point that many historians argue that it was practically a theocracy.¹⁶ The region was much more densely populated, with

¹³ Wright and Tinling, eds., *London Diary*, 36, 39, 45-46.

¹⁴ Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 30.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12, 24.

¹⁶ Theocracy is a very loaded term, and although this has been the popular view for most of American history, this theory had been undermined in the twentieth century by Perry Miller and his protégé Edmund S. Morgan, among other historians, who argue that Puritanism interfered less with governance than previously thought (See: Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), and Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop, Second Edition* (New York: Longman Press, 1999). However, many historians, including Francis J. Bremmer, *The Puritan Experiment: New England Society from Bradford to Edwards, Revised Edition* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1995), are reluctant to adopt this view.

immigrants and their descendents rapidly establishing villages throughout the area. In addition, the rocky soil and cold weather made agriculture, with the exception of animal husbandry, difficult and slavery much less prevalent. Because of this, trade became an economic force to a much greater degree than in Virginia, and a merchant class, which included Samuel Sewall, developed to handle the demand for goods from Europe, the Americas, and Africa. In his biography of Sewall, T. B. Strandness quotes Samuel Maverick, a visitor to Boston in 1660, “The Towne is full of good shopps well furnished with all kind Merchandize and many Artificers, and Trad’smen of all sorts.”¹⁷ However, although Virginia and New England were vastly different, they shared the common bond of English heritage and culture, Protestantism, and the legacy of the medieval social and economic structure, including the manor-like plantations of the southern gentry and the quasi-medieval villages of the Puritans.¹⁸

Although both William Byrd and Samuel Sewall were men of means and enjoyed comfortable lives, their economic and social positions were not entirely similar. Byrd was part of the gentry class, persons for whom, as G.E. Aylmer remarks in his history of England in the seventeenth century, “land—in the form of profits from agriculture and rent from their tenants—was the basis of their wealth. Their social and political preponderance, too, rested on landownership.” They did not consider direct trading, the work of merchants, to be gentlemanly, and usually refrained from it. Sewall, as both a merchant and a landowner, can be seen to have been somewhere between the urban middle class (bourgeoisie) and Byrd’s landed gentry.¹⁹

¹⁷ Strandness, *Sewall: A Puritan Portrait*, 95.

¹⁸ For an examination of Virginian society, see Rhys Isaac’s *The Transformation of Virginia*, which discusses the importance of public and private space in relation to Chesapeake culture. For an examination of Puritan culture in general, see: Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson, *The Puritans* (New York: American Book Company, 1938). In addition, to understand the Puritan’s relationship to the land and their town structure, see: William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), which discusses how New Englanders fenced off their land and established their common area towns and villages.

¹⁹ G. E. Aylmer, *The Struggle for the Constitution: England in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Blandford Press, 1963), 34-35, 37.

Also, the nature of the faiths which these men professed was not completely similar, and their differences may illuminate the sometimes conflicting attitudes of Sewall and Byrd's writings which will soon be examined. In William Byrd's Virginia, the Church of England was the established church, and their doctrines and observances were less intense and strict than their Puritan neighbors to the north. Rhys Isaac comments that "Anglo-Virginians...did not find it necessary to exhibit...pious routine." Also, unlike Puritans, prayer and church attendance were not necessarily required constantly of everyone: "Custom and the law required attendance once in four weeks at church, but neither were strict concerning regularity, so that the cycle of the week...was marked more certainly by a seventh day or rest and conviviality than by prayerful devotions." This was partially due, no doubt, to the isolated nature of much of Chesapeake society.²⁰

In contrast, in Samuel Sewall's home of Massachusetts, the often studied and commented upon Puritan worldview dominated for most, if not all, of Sewall's life. According to Mary Beth Norton in her book *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692*, this "singular worldview...taught them that they were a chosen people...[to which] God spoke...repeatedly through his providences." Furthermore, "remarkable signs, [including] smallpox epidemics, [and] the sudden deaths of children or spouses...carried messages from God to his people, if only they could interpret the meanings properly."²¹ Also, Puritans frequently studied the Bible, prayed with their families daily, and attended church regularly. This is a far removed from the somewhat secularized society of Byrd's Virginia.²²

In looking at the roles of medical practices, health, disease, and death in the lives William

²⁰ Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 58, 68.

²¹ Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 295.

²² Mary Beth Norton, et al., *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States, Volume One: To 1877, Sixth*

Byrd II and Samuel Sewall, representatives of two important colonial regional cultures, this paper will primarily focus on the diaries and letters from the pens of the men themselves. Byrd, who kept a daily, detailed, and sometimes formulaic diary for three periods, 1709 to 1712, 1717 to 1721, and 1739 to 1741, also wrote letters that spanned the entirety of his life. Sewall's rich diary, although less regular in its entries, contains reflections on over a half century of Sewall's life, including the period from 1674 through 1729. His "Letter-Book" survives, containing correspondence from 1685 until 1729, and spans almost as long a period as his journal. The diaries of Byrd and Sewall are arguably the most famous from colonial America, and their copious recordings of the events of their life and the world around them provide unrivaled access to the colonial mind.

A discussion of life and death in a civilization is perhaps best prefaced with some knowledge of the medical world, its practitioners, and the treatments available. Before the seventeenth century, medical knowledge was, as one might expect, still primarily based on Greek and Roman works.²³ In Europe, according to Mark Harrison, the author of *Disease and the Modern World*, the "ever-present danger of an epidemic...supported a wide variety of medical practitioners."²⁴ With the advent of the humanistic Renaissance, those trained in medicine began to believe that "many diseases could be understood and treated...using human intelligence independently of faith."²⁵ Roy Porter remarks in his *Flesh in the Age of Reason* that it was believed that "sickness set in when bodily balance was disturbed. If the system grew too hot...a fever; if too cool and wet, [one] developed a cold."²⁶

Edition, (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 49.

²³ Irvine Loudon, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Western Medicine* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 74-78.

²⁴ Mark Harrison, *Disease and the Modern World: 1500 to the Present Day* (Cambridge and Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2004), 17, 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁶ Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2003), 30.

The main theory of illness was quite old and was connected to the ancient Greek concept of humors advocated by Galen in the second century C.E. and still accepted as fact in colonial times. According to the humoral theory, the four universal elements (fire, water, earth, and air) were each related to “humors” found in the body: cold, dry, hot, and moist.²⁷ One was in good health when each of these bodily elements were in balance with each other, and one became sick when one or more humors were disproportionate. Phlegm was said to be cold and moist, yellow bile hot and dry, blood hot and moist, and black bile was cold and dry; also, people “tended” to be inclined towards a “temperament” corresponding to one of these bodily fluids, i.e. phlegmatic, choleric, sanguine, and melancholic, respectively.²⁸ Treatments for maladies connected to humoral imbalance included bleeding or cooling for fever (as by sweating), warming for someone with chills, or an enema for too much black bile in a patient’s stool.²⁹

On this topic, Sewall remarks in his diary, “I was taken ill...very feverish so as feared the Fever and Ague, took some Cardnus Drink at night, Sweat pretty well, and so it went off, blessed be God.”³⁰ As has been mentioned, sickness was prevented and dealt with by attempting to balance the elements, or humors, of the body, be it through bloodletting, herbal remedies, or other supposed “scientific” treatments. Byrd comments in 1709 that he treated his slave Jack from rheumatism by having him “let blood,” which seemed to work, so the next day he reports: “[I] found [Jack] had slept very well without pain, for which reason I caused him to be let blood again.” During an epidemic of distemper (a vague term applied to various maladies during colonial times which meant an imbalance of humours causing a disturbance to one’s physical

²⁷ Ronald L. Numbers, ed., *Medicine in the New World: New Spain, New France, and New England* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 110.

²⁸ Oscar Reiss, *Medicine In Colonial America* (Lanham, New York, and Oxford: University Press of America, 2000), 145-146.

²⁹ Numbers, ed., *Medicine in the New World*, 110-111.

³⁰ Thomas, ed., *Sewall Diary*, 68.

temperament) the same year Byrd writes in his diary, “The best remedy for [distemper] is sweating and the best way to prevent it is to vomit and purge,” and continues, “[it] never comes but in winter and as the cold weather abates that abates also.”³¹ Although Byrd and Sewall lived in later centuries, the medical knowledge of colonial America was in many ways rooted in Galenic theory and practices found in Europe.

However, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the time of the Enlightenment, science and medicine both had developed further. With increasing interest in the natural world, including the study of the human body, medicine became more modernized and less dependent upon the works of classical civilization. In the established civilizations of Europe, changes were more quickly adopted and profound than in the hardscrabble, pioneer culture of Britain’s American colonies. Plague more or less retreated from Europe, and in turn the Americas, but fatal diseases such as smallpox and gout were still widespread, especially in areas of new settlement like the British colonies. Also, the theory that God was entirely responsible for maladies was on the wane (although God remained the ultimate cause of illness and health), with Harrison commenting that for many doctors, “there was no place for the notions of soul and spirit that had permeated Galenic medicine.”³² However, the plague, most deadly of diseases, was still present in the colonial mind as a sign of God’s retribution: William Byrd himself wrote a treatise entitled “A Discourse Concerning the Plague with Some Preservatives Against It” in 1721 which comments that “the Plague...is more destructive to mankind than any other [disease]...one of the severest scourges that God Almighty makes use of, to chastize a corrupt

³¹ Wright and Tinling eds., *Secret Diary, 1709-1712*, 39, 10; On distemper being such a vague term, see *The Oxford History of Western Medicine*.

³² Harrison, *Disease*, 51-52.

and degenerate people.”³³

To prevent the imbalance of humors and the illness that resulted, many colonial Americans, including, to different extents, Byrd and Sewall, stressed the importance of having a healthy lifestyle, which included at least some moderation of their diets and physical activity. Although Roy Porter contends that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries “traditional wisdom maintained that...healthy constitutional stoutness and strength were upheld by a hearty appetite, especially for red meat” and that “stoutness...was esteemed as the mark of the wealthy,” the middle-class sensibility of Byrd and Sewall seems to have tempered these extreme and physically unhealthy beliefs.³⁴ Whether in the form of dietary limitations or exercise regimens, both men felt, to different extents, that taking care of their bodies was important for a long and healthy life (even if Byrd and Sewall defined “moderation” quite differently, as we shall see). However, in both cases, they believed the body, given by God, was something to be taken care of and not to be abused by excessive gluttony and sloth which violated God’s creation.

A book published in 1800 by a Boston physician echoes colonial opinions on exercise; although the author believes that it helps circulation and bodily strength and “clears the blood,” one could “burst blood vessels and cause miscarriages and inflammation” if they overexert themselves. Also, many things that may not seem very strenuous by our modern standards were considered good exercise, including speaking, singing, and riding in carriages.³⁵ Byrd and Sewall both seem to have had at least some affinity for physical activity, even if their conceptions of “exercise” may not seem very difficult to us. Sewall records he “went into the

³³ Maude H. Woodfin and Marion Tinling, eds., *Another Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1739-1741, With Letters and Literary Exercises 1696-1726* (Richmond, Virginia: The Dietz Press, 1942), 415, 417.

³⁴ Porter, *Age of Reason*, 234.

³⁵ Reiss, *Medicine in Colonial America*, 84-85.

Water” of Charleston River to swim in 1687 and in 1689, while in England, he “went with Mr. Brattle and swam in the Thames.” Certainly he went on walks around Boston, visiting friends or enjoying a cool evening. Unlike Byrd, he often did not record the minutiae of his daily activities, so it is difficult to know his regular exercise patterns. However, judging from his diet, which will be detailed later, and comparing him with the fitness-concerned Byrd, it is probable that Sewall did not have a regular exercise routine and physical activity was an incidental part of life.³⁶

Byrd is much more explicit about his feelings on exercise. He loved to take long walks around his plantation, either alone or with his wife: “In the evening we walked about the plantation.”; “We took a walk and met Mr. C-s who walked with us.”; and, humorously, “We walked very fast to the church and almost killed Parson Dunn, who was forced to run all the way to keep up with us.”³⁷ In addition, he regularly practiced a form of exercise he called “dancing,” a workout befitting a gentleman: “After dinner...[I] danced instead of walking because it was overcast.”³⁸ This activity, usually following breakfast, is what Kenneth Lockridge terms a “Western version of Tai-chi...with specific physical and spiritual virtues in every single motion,” and Byrd biographer Pierre Marambaud comments that “it was certainly some sort of rhythmical exercise.” This was also probably not unlike calisthenics, done in the morning to help limber up the body for a day’s activity.³⁹ The routine had eight movements, each of which “evoked prudence”; one began by bowing, then moving the foot, etc., each representing a virtue such as maturity, industry, and the like.⁴⁰

³⁶ Thomas, ed., *Sewall Diary*, 146, 226.

³⁷ Wright and Tinling, eds., *Secret Diary, 1709-1712*, 13, 175, 108.

³⁸ Woodfin and Tinling, eds., *Another Secret Diary*, 120.

³⁹ Lockridge, *The Diary, and Life*, 23; Pierre Marambaud, *William Byrd of Westover, 1674-1744* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1971), 61.

⁴⁰ Lockridge, *The Diary, and Life*, 23.

Dietary moderation (and lack thereof) were also important concepts to Byrd and Sewall. Whether it be eating too much or overindulging in drink, excessive consumption was frowned upon by men of the middle and upper classes in Virginia, while to some extent in Puritan New England only overindulgence in drink was seen as sinful; these differing opinions are reflected in the writings of both men. Byrd usually only drank sparingly, rarely overindulging: “[We] drank a glass of Rhenish wine and sugar”; “We drank some French wine” (after the birth of one of his sons). However, he had some moments of weakness from his strict moral code, commenting that when playing cards he “drank too much French wine” and “neglected to say [his] prayers,” and recalls a later incident where he and some of his friends “drank some...cider till we were very merry and then went to the coffeehouse and pulled poor Colonel Churchill out of bed.”⁴¹

In addition, Byrd, in his quest to achieve gentlemanly moderation in all aspects of life, went as far as to limit himself to only one type of food at each meal, and especially dinner. When he did break the rule, he noted it in his diary, and he sometimes praised himself on his ability to not overindulge: “There was a plentiful dinner but I ate nothing but fowl.”⁴² Byrd strived to eat healthily in a time when little was known about what foods were beneficial and what the effects were of overeating. One might speculate that his strict diet was, at least in part, his own unique vision on how to balance the humours and fend off illness, although there is nothing in the diary that directly comments on this. Byrd’s diet went against normal balancing of meals for Englishmen of his social class during this period.⁴³ In the words of Pierre Marambaud, “In those days of feasting and drinking excesses, [Byrd] may be considered to have

⁴¹ Wright and Tinling eds., *Secret Diary, 1709-1712*, 28, 80, 82, 98.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴³ Byrd seems to have been quite the anomaly in this area. For a discussion of the diet of the English country gentlemen during Byrd’s time, see J. C. Drummond and Anne Wilbraham’s *The Englishman’s Food: Five Centuries of English Diet* (London: Pilmico Press, 1991), 210-218. This passage highlights the emphasis on a balanced diet by people of Byrd’s social class.

been fairly temperate.”⁴⁴

Samuel Sewall was a different story entirely. While frowning on consuming too much drink, like other early Puritans he enjoyed alcoholic beverages and the pleasures they brought as long as one did not become a “drunkard.” Sewall often indulged at social occasions, enjoying “good Wine, Burgundy and Canary, good Beer” at one marriage celebration and commenting after a cordial visit that “Madam Dudley had given me Beer as I chose; Governer Dudley would have me drink a Glass of very good wine.” However, he did recognize that too much drinking was not good for physical or mental health, writing when he heard of the death of a fellow townsman who had died from choking on her own blood while asleep: “Her death puts in mind of the Proverb wherein we say such an one hat drunk more than he hath bled today.” Also, he saw the theological disadvantages of overindulging, recording that some travelers “inflamed with Drink” stopped in Boston and proceeded to “...drink Healths, curse, swear, talk profanely and bauldily to the great disturbance of the Town and grief of good people. Such high-handed wickedness has hardly been heard of before in Boston.”⁴⁵

Sewall also had no compulsion for attempting to restrict his eating: at age fifty, he weighed 193 pounds, and nineteen years later in 1721 he tipped the scales at 228 pounds, somewhat overweight for a man considered on the short side by contemporaries.⁴⁶ According to T. H. Strandness, “he enjoyed many a ‘sumtuous feast’ with untroubled conscience,” and regularly indulged in large meals and sweet treats. His coat’s spacious pockets were “filled with pleasant dainties” including chocolate, oranges, figs, and currants.⁴⁷ Sewall, as with much of his life, ultimately attributed it all to God, stating simply, “The Lord add, or take away from this our

⁴⁴ Marambaud, *Byrd of Westover*, 61.

⁴⁵ Thomas, ed., *Sewall Diary*, 1067, 836, 48, 121.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 479.

⁴⁷ Strandness, *Sewall: A Puritan Portrait*, 160-161.

corporeal weight, so as shall be most advantageous for our Spiritual Growth.” While Sewall saw God as the primary source of health, Byrd did everything he could to maintain good health, perhaps realizing that divine will was not sufficient to prevent the deterioration of mortal flesh.⁴⁸

Although exercise and diet helped prevent injury and disease, the expertise of medical practitioners was necessary when one did become sick or was hurt in the frontier world of colonial British America. As profound changes in medical thought were taking place in Europe, in colonial America the comparably rough existence eked out by most, including much of the elite, left little time and few resources with which to understand and implement the new “scientific” theories and treatments from the Old World. Instead, for much of the colonial period, including the lives of Byrd and Sewall, colonial medicine relied upon a composite approach, a fusion of Native American, European, and African practices that used natural remedies alongside more standard medicines. This form of medicine was adopted by both the “official” medical practitioners as well as by common men and women.

Doctors and other medical practitioners of different varieties were present in both colonial New England and Virginia, and Byrd and Sewall both associated with them during times of medical crisis. In her book *The Healer's Calling: Women and Medicine in Early New England*, Rebecca J. Tannenbaum speaks of the “hierarchy” of healers determined by “social rank...education and training...and gender.” At the top were the few university-trained physicians, followed by men who referred to themselves as doctors but had no college education in medicine and instead apprenticed to other self-educated physicians, their “masters.” At the bottom, and most common, were “healers,” including men trained in other trades, women, and

⁴⁸ Thomas, ed., *Sewall Diary*, 479.

members of the lower class.⁴⁹

William Byrd counted many “physicians” as his friends and acquaintances, and some of them treated illness and injuries suffered at Westover. In May of 1709, Dr. Archibald Blair, who practiced medicine in Jamestown and Williamsburg, was “[sent] for to set a negro boy’s leg which was broken this morning by the fall of the door in the brick house.”⁵⁰ Later, in 1740, Byrd called on a local physician and recorded it in his diary: “I was let Blood and the next day took a Purge...I sent for Dr. Monger who approvd what had been done.” After consulting the doctor, Byrd writes that he was “ordered [to take] a mixture of Juice of Oranges Salt of Wormwood and Hordealed Cinnomon Water with some Prepared Pearl, which abated my Feaver, but did no service to my Cough.”⁵¹

Samuel Sewall often had contact with local medical practitioners because of the disease and injuries that often plagued his family. When his infant son Hull was ill, “taken with Convulsion Fits” he was given “of Dr. Winthrop’s Physick and Cordials.” In 1714, his sickly daughter Hannah fell “down the new Stairs, fell, and broke the Pan of her Right Knee in two.” Sewall then writes, “[I] sent for Dr. Cutler, who told us how it was.” The physician then “bath’d it, with spirits of Wine, put on a large Plaister, then with two bolsters and large Swathing bound it up tite to bring the broken pieces together, and Unite them.” At the sickness of his son Joseph in June 1712, Sewall summoned a “Consultation of Physicians,” including the aforementioned Dr. Cutler, to help explain his son’s “grievous vomiting.”⁵²

Both physicians and common people used folk remedies and herbal medicines to treat

⁴⁹ Rebecca J. Tannenbaum, *The Healer’s Calling: Women and Medicine in Early New England* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 11-13.

⁵⁰ Wright and Tinling, eds., *Secret Diary, 1709-1712*, 67.

⁵¹ Woodfin and Tinling, eds., *Another Secret Diary*, 104.

⁵² Thomas, ed., *Sewall Diary*, 84, 765, 690.

maladies. Oscar Reiss, a physician and author of *Medicine in Colonial America*, comments that colonial folk medicine consisted of two concepts, the first of which was “empiric medicine: if something worked before it would work again in similar situations.” He continues, “The second foundation was the persistence of outmoded theories of medicine long rejected by the medical profession at the time...[for example] scientific remedies of the eighteenth century were folk medicine of the twentieth.” These popular remedies often retained much of the spiritual content of earlier medicine and were not too far removed from the premises of Hippocratic medicine. For example, says Reiss, to treat a rupture, colonials often split a tree trunk in half, passing the patient through the hole three times “because it called in The Father, The Son, and the Holy Spirit”; the tree was then mended, and “if the patch took, the rupture was cured.” In the world of William Byrd and Samuel Sewall, where the supernatural was real and ancient superstitions held sway, medicine took many interesting forms.⁵³

Like other colonial citizens, Byrd and Sewall, living far from the established civilization of Europe with its scientific and medical innovations, were forced to practice different forms of folk medicine. Byrd, strangely enough, was an early proponent of the use of the Asian herb ginseng in the New World and often used another herbal remedy, rattlesnake root. He refers to rattlesnake root in his letters, saying “the powder is given in the gout and rheumatism, and give ease in a very short time...for intermitting fevers and slow fevers I have found it usefull in every shape after a vomit.” On ginseng he is even more enthusiastic: “Without a joke the effect of [ginseng] will be, that ‘twill help all the diseases of the head, and enliven all the senses...it is friendly to the lungs and comfortable to the stomach.”⁵⁴ He also went as far as to call ginseng in another letter “our plant of life.” Of herbal medicine in general Byrd comments, “when a plant

⁵³ Reiss, *Medicine In Colonial America*, 93-94.

⁵⁴ Marion Tinling, ed., *The Correspondence of the Three William Byrds of Westover, Virginia, 1684-1776*. 2 vols.

has some remarkable virtues, people are apt to cry it up for a universall remedy, which is an honour Providence has done to no single medicine, because it woud make us lazy in our searches into nature” and that “a man coud not do a greater good to mankind, than to bestow a handsome stipend yearly upon a well qualified naturallist, to come and make discoverys [of herbal remedies] in these parts of the world.”⁵⁵ In addition, Byrd’s first wife, Lucy, seems to have also practiced folk medicine: “My wife anointed my fundament with tobacco oil and blasam of saltpeter mixed together”; “My wife anointed by bum with hot linseed which had done it some good...I went to bed early and had my breech anointed [by Lucy].”⁵⁶

Although Sewall does not wax so enthusiastically on herbal medicine, he still seems to have been somewhat interested in medical treatments. During his trip to England in 1689, Sewall and several other prominent New Englanders visited the “Physick Garden” (the Garden for Medical Plants) at Chelsea, and they saw “among other things...Cortex Peruvianus” or Peruvian bark, a popular herbal remedy coming into popularity in both Europe and the British colonies in America.⁵⁷ Even if Sewall’s diary and letters are relatively silent on the matter of herbal treatments, they were very important to the society in which he lived, and their raw ingredients were probably grown in the family garden. As described in Tannenbaum’s *The Healer’s Calling*, “medicinal plants such as sorrel, marigolds, anise, and houseleeks [were] found growing in seventeenth-century New England gardens,” according to an account from the period. After being harvested, the herbs were often directly made into medicines by “stilling” them, a process which involved boiling the plants and “condensing the steam.”⁵⁸ Perhaps

(Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1977), 533.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 585.

⁵⁶ Wright and Tinling eds., *Secret Diary, 1709-1712*, 197.

⁵⁷ Thomas, ed., *Sewall Diary*, 233.

⁵⁸ Tannenbaum, *Healer’s Calling*, 26-27.

Sewall's writing is silent about herbal remedies because, as one recent scholar puts it the compilation *Medicine in the New World: New Spain, New France, and New England*, "the native plants of New England were 'insufficient to furnish most of the medical profession's therapeutic needs'" due to the poorer soil and colder weather as compared to the southern colonies.⁵⁹

Along with the search for various herbal remedies, in both America and Europe there was a quest for a "panacea," an herbal or chemical "cure-all" that would prevent disease and generally improve one's constitution. The previously mentioned Peruvian Bark was one contender for this "cure all," perhaps because, unlike other alleged panaceas, it actually treated an ailment—malaria. This effectiveness had to do with the fact that the primary active ingredient found in the bark was Quinine, now the common medicine associated with malaria. In addition, the usefulness of a natural remedy also called into question the long-held humoral theory.⁶⁰ Other possible panaceas, not mentioned specifically by Byrd or Sewall, but probably known to them, were Mithridatium and another drug associated with it, Theriac. In fact, in the late eighteenth century the failure of these drugs to realize their promise was credited to improper manufacturing, and this prompted Britain to create the first laws relating to pharmaceutical regulation.⁶¹ In a time when medical treatments usually came from natural sources and new remedies could only be tested by trial and error, the quest for a panacea demonstrated the desire of Europeans and their colonists to discover a cure for all disease and ward off the ever-present specters of disease and death.

William Byrd was one of these new, forward-thinking men, albeit an amateur, who

⁵⁹ Numbers, ed., *Medicine in the New World*, 141.

⁶⁰ Gregory J. Higby, "Botanicals," *Discovering Lewis and Clark*, <www.lewis-clark.org/content/content-article.asp?ArticleID=2563>, 1.

⁶¹ J. P. Griffin, "Venetian Treacle and the Foundation of Medicine's Regulation," *British Journal of Clinical Pharmacology*, vol. 58, no. 3 (March 2004), 317.

sought for a panacea among the new herbal discoveries of the Americas and the East. Although he commented, as mentioned earlier, that there was no “universall remedy,” Byrd seems to have felt that ginseng filled this role, writing that “it gives an uncommon Warmth and Vigour to the Blood...beyond any other cordial,” and continuing, “It cheers the heart of a Man [with] a bad Wife...dissolves all Phlegmatic and Viscous Humours....[and] helps the Memory. In one Word, it will make a Man live a great while, and very well while he does live.” Even though Byrd talks so enthusiastically about ginseng, his conflicting comments on the subject of a panacea would lead one to believe that he became disillusioned with the concept, saying, as referred to earlier, that God has made no such miraculous cure-all. As for Sewall, he is silent on this subject, but perhaps, as with other aspects of his life, he put his trust entirely in God.⁶²

It is now, then, that we turn to something that was, in many ways, much more real and familiar to Byrd and Sewall than it is to many today in our country: death, the final reality when human invention and medicine failed. On the cusp of the modern world, yet isolated in the hostile climate of the New World, the possibility of the premature loss of life was always near at hand in the colonies. Sewall sums up the colonial view of death in his diary, saying, “Col. Fitch surpriseth me by saying Mr. Eliakim Hutchinson died last night, an hour after midnight. How we are circumvented with Mortality!”⁶³ The lives of both men were riddled with the tragedy of death, from close family members to old friends. All the physicians and herbal remedies in the colonies could not prevent the spread of epidemics like smallpox that periodically decimated populations in both regions, or the maladies that affected young children, their mothers, and the elderly. With so little knowledge of the human body and the diseases that afflicted it, medical

⁶² William K. Boyd, ed., *William Byrd's Histories of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967), 274.

⁶³ Thomas, ed., *Sewall Diary*, 893.

practitioners usually only could treat non-life-threatening illnesses like a cold or a mild fever and their efforts were futile when more serious, terminal problems developed. That mortality was ever-present, even in the lives of relatively well-off men like Byrd and Sewall is a testament to the pervasiveness of death in British colonial America.

Each man's writings are filled with references to their fellow citizens having a terminal illness or death. Sewall writes in 1719 that while in church, the pastor "Mr. Bradstreet... mention'd the sudden Deaths, several times. Have been 4 of late..."; on January 6, 1710, he writes, "James Hawkins dyes very suddenly, about 56 years old." Another acquaintance, Dudley Bradstreet, was a young man studying to become a priest who "quickly after he had received Orders, dy'd of the small Pocks."⁶⁴ Byrd's journal is also filled with references to friends and acquaintances that have suddenly died: "Poor old Ben (a servant) died ten days ago and [I] learned that Mr. Isham Eppes died likewise about the same time."; "About 9 poor Dick C-r-n died, notwithstanding all the care we could take of him."⁶⁵ Whether those affected were relatives, friends, servants, or fellow citizens, the records of each individual's death in both men's journals surely reminded them of the fragility of life in their societies.

Yet both men experienced the effects of illness and premature death more personally, and both Byrd and Sewall witnessed the early passing of children and spouses. This, of course, was not uncommon in the western world of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Due to antiquated medical care, general ignorance of what caused disease, and little understanding of how the human body worked, colonial life expectancies were much lower than they are in the United States today. In England, the average lifespan was fifty to fifty-five years, but in Virginia, the climate, which bred epidemics of malaria and other diseases, made the life

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 905, 631, 765.

⁶⁵ Wright and Tinling, eds., *Secret Diary, 1709-1712*, 111; Woodfin and Tinling, eds., *Another Secret Diary*, 104.

expectancy around ten years lower. However, in New England, because of a healthier climate, less distance between populated areas (physicians would not have to travel so far to treat patients), and the absence of the short lives of the slave population, the normal lifespan was over fifteen years longer than in Virginia.⁶⁶ In fact, many of the first generation of settlers in New England lived to age seventy.⁶⁷ The effect of climate can be seen in the lifespan of Byrd and Sewall: Byrd, who tried to live a health conscious life, lived until age seventy, while Sewall, who probably lived a predominantly sedentary life, and was mildly overweight, outlived Byrd by eight years.

Childbirth was a dangerous time for both mothers and their newborn children in British colonial America. There were frequent miscarriages, women died in childbirth, and children were often stillborn or were sickly and survived only a few days or months. In her book *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*, Kathleen M. Brown remarks, “Even the misfortune of miscarriage may have seemed like welcome relief when it cut short a painful pregnancy,” and recounts a description of one of Lucy’s miscarriages found in Byrd’s diary: the day following a distressing miscarriage, she was “extremely mended and very cheerful.”⁶⁸ Indeed, about ninety percent of children reached adulthood in the colony Massachusetts during the colonial period (although this was not the case in Sewall’s family), while in Chesapeake society the figure was much lower.⁶⁹ Because of this discrepancy, in the seventeenth century if mother in Virginia could raise one to three children to

⁶⁶ Norton, et al., *People and a Nation*, 54.

⁶⁷ James West Davidson, et al., *Nation of Nations: A Narrative History of the American Republic, Volume I: To 1877, Second Edition* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994), 92.

⁶⁸ Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 302-303.

⁶⁹ Davidson, et al., *Nation of Nations*, 92.

adulthood, her New England counterpart would usually raise five to seven healthy children.⁷⁰

The personal experiences of Byrd and Sewall mirror the difficulty bringing children safely to adulthood in a world filled with medical ignorance and disease. Byrd lost his infant son Parke in 1710; less than a year old, his son was “very sick of a fever and began to break out terribly” on May 12th. After “continuing indisposed” for almost a month, he “died about 8 o’clock in the morning.” Taking consolation in his faith, Byrd writes “God gives and God takes away...My wife was much afflicted but I submitted to His judgment better, notwithstanding I was very sensible of my loss, but God’s will be done.” In the next few days, Byrd experienced an upset stomach (“gripes”), while Lucy had “several fits of tears...continued very melancholy...[and was] exceeding afflicted for the loss of her child.”⁷¹ An emotional man, Byrd and his wife were certainly greatly affected by the loss of their two young sons, tragedies that surely remained with them throughout their lives.

Like Byrd, Sewall also knew the pain of losing a child due to the ravages of illness and the poor medical care of the colonial era. As has been mentioned, only six of his fourteen children survived infancy, and although this rate of mortality was not uncommon in colonial New England, the deaths of their children must have affected Puritan parents greatly. Sewall’s first child, John, born on April 2nd, 1677, began to have convulsions on June 17th, where he “suddenly started, trembled, his fingers contracted, his eyes starting and being distorted.” After over a year of illness, the young child finally died in September of 1678. His second child, Samuel, born in 1678, also suffered convulsions as an infant, and was often ill (he “taken ill of a Fever and we fear the Small Pox” in 1687) but managed to survive them.⁷² Sewall’s first

⁷⁰ Norton, et al., *A People and a Nation*, 55.

⁷¹ Wright and Tinling, eds., *Secret Diary, 1709-1712*, 177, 186-189.

⁷² Thomas, ed., *Sewall Diary*, 41, 43, 45-47, 130.

daughter, Hannah, born in 1679, survived childhood but was always a sickly person: “she broke her head grievously just above the left eye”; “not well, vomits and has Qualms”; “sick of the Measles. Droop’d ever since Thorsday.” When Hannah died in 1724, Sewall wrote in his diary, “I hope God has delivered her from all her Fears!,” and he records that he posted on the Old South Church: ““Samuel Sewall desires Prayers, that the Death of his Eldest Daughter may be Sanctified to him.””⁷³

Samuel and Hannah’s next daughter, Elizabeth, born in 1681, survived, but Hull, Henry, and Stephen, their next three children, all died in infancy.⁷⁴ When Stephen, died in 1687, Samuel records the shock of the event to the young Sewall family in his diary: “Samuel (his son) and his sisters cryed much coming home and at home, so that [we] could hardly quiet them. It seems they look’d into the Tomb.”⁷⁵ Mary, born in 1691, Judith, born in 1702, and Joseph, born in 1707, were the remaining three to make it through childhood.⁷⁶ In addition, Sewall also had many of his grandchildren die; Joseph, son of Samuel’s son Joseph, came down with “Convulsion Fits... Alas! Alas!” shortly after his birth in 1719 and died soon thereafter. Another grandson, John Sewall, died “aged about 16 months and ten days,” which caused Samuel to write, “The good Lord Teach me what the meaning of this reiterated Stroke should be!”⁷⁷ Sewall obviously was shaken by these deaths, being a loving and concerned father and grandfather, but he took comfort in his faith and surely accepted that the death of young children was a part of life—certainly many of his neighbors in Boston, such as Cotton Mather, experienced similar tragedies that were impossible to prevent with the inadequate medical knowledge and care

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 122, 132, 145, 158.

⁷⁴ Strandness, *Sewall: A Puritan Portrait*, 123-124.

⁷⁵ Thomas, ed., *Sewall Diary*, 145.

⁷⁶ Strandness, *Sewall: A Puritan Portrait*, 124.

⁷⁷ Thomas, ed., *Sewall Diary*, 926, 1021.

available in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁷⁸

While the death of one's child was certainly a heartbreaking event in colonial America, the when one's spouse died it was even harder to cope with. While one could hope to have other, healthy, children in the future, when one's husband or wife died, it not only left a huge emotional void, it also completely disrupted the normal patterns of life and fractured the family household, forcing the widowed spouse to search for a replacement so life could go on and the family could continue. This need for marriage on the part of widowers was in part because of the long-established patriarchal system, dominant in America until the late twentieth century, in which the man was expected to provide economic resources for the upbringing his children while his wife was supposed to actually care for the children.⁷⁹ William Byrd and Samuel Sewall both experienced the emotional pain and the practical obstacles associated with losing a wife. Also, each, because of the social and practical benefits of being married in British colonial society, was pressured to remarry, and to do it relatively quickly by modern standards. From the writings they left behind, it is not difficult to conclude that the deaths of their wives affected them profoundly and enduringly; indeed, it could be said that these events were the most emotionally intense moments in each of their lives.

Even though William Byrd and his first wife Lucy often quarreled over small matters and were angry at each other, it is clear from the diary and his letters that theirs was a marriage built on passion and love. It is therefore all the more tragic that Lucy died suddenly of smallpox while the Byrds were in London. Byrd wrote to his friend John Custis shortly after, recounting his

⁷⁸ Strandness, *Sewall: A Puritan Portrait*, 122.

⁷⁹ For a discussion of child-rearing in England, see: Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage: In England 1500-1800* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1977), 109-145, etc., which discusses the reinforcement of patriarchy in the early modern family and the role of children in the family; for Massachusetts, see: Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth Century New England. Second Edition* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1966), 65-66, etc., which discusses similar topics for Puritan New England, especially familial roles.

wife's final hours: "She was taken with an insupportable pain in her head. The doctor soon discovered her ailment to be the small-pox, and we thought it best to tell her the danger." He continues, writing, "She received the news without the least fright, and was persuaded she would live until the day she died, which happened in 12 hours from the time she was taken." In fact, as early as 1709, Byrd had at least subconsciously worried about the specter of death overtaking his family: "I had a bad dream this morning which seemed to foretell the death of some of my family...I could not find my wife. God avert her death."⁸⁰ In the same letter to Custis, Byrd concludes by writing, "Alas! How proud was I of her, and how severely am I punished for it. But I can dwell no longer on so afflicting a subject, much less can I think of anything else, therefore, I can only recommend myself to your pity..."⁸¹ There is little else in Byrd's writing concerning his beloved first wife after her death. He most likely did not keep a diary during the period of her passing, and in later years his letters and commonplace book are silent on his feelings; perhaps he kept his mourning to himself, preferring not to become overly emotional in a diary that was supposed to demonstrate his restraint and moderation in all things. However, Byrd surely looked for comfort in his period of mourning by turning to his daughters, friends like John Custis, and the consolation of his faith in God.

Although William Byrd lost his first wife Lucy at a young age, his remarriage to Maria Taylor (a younger woman) was without such misfortune, and she outlived him. However, Samuel Sewall was not as fortunate, losing not one but two of his wives to illness. His first wife, Hannah, died in October of 1717. Her illness progressed quickly: "My Wife got some Relapse by a new Cold and grew very bad...[I] sat up...all night." The next day, Sewall writes, "The Distemper increases," and two days later, he writes that she "grows worse and exceedingly

⁸⁰ Wright and Tinling, eds., *Secret Diary, 1709-1712*, 60.

⁸¹ Tinling, ed., *Correspondence of Three William Byrds*, 296.

Restless. Pray'd God to look upon her." The following day Hannah's affliction overtook her: "My dear Wife expired in the Afternoon, whereby the Chamber was fill'd with a Flood of Tears." Sewall then tries to rationalize this loss with his faith, writing, "God is teaching me a new Lesson; to live a Widower's Life Lord help me Learn...now so much of my Confort and Defense are taken away." The next day, a Sunday, Cotton Mather delivered a sermon in memory of Hannah, and Sewall comments that "my son has much adoe to read the Note I put up, being overwhelmed with tears." He had the sermon printed up and distributed to his friends and acquaintances by mid-November. Surely Hannah's death had a great impact upon Sewall, for in 1728, he writes, "Seeing this to be the same day of the week and Moneth that the Wife of my youth expired Eleven years agoe, it much affected me. I writ to my dear Son Mr. Joseph Sewall of it, desiring him to come and dine with me."⁸²

By October of 1719, Sewall had remarried, marrying Abigail Tilly, but this union too was to end in tragedy for Sewall. Within a little over six months of their marriage, Abigail too had died. On the night of May 26th, Sewall writes that "about 11 or before, my dear Wife was oppress'd with a rising of Flegm that obstructed her Breathing...About midnight my dear wife expired to our great astonishment, especially mine." He continues, again appealing to divine Providence, "May the Sovereign Lord pardon my Sin, and Sanctify to me this very Extraordinary, awfull Dispensation." Abigail sickened and died within the span of only a couple of hours, an event not uncommon in a time when one could not get medical care easily or quickly and when minor illnesses or bodily afflictions could kill one within a very short time because of the relative medical ignorance of the day. A few days later, he writes, "God having in his holy Sovereignty put my Wife out of the Fore-Seat, I apprehended I had Cause to be

⁸² Thomas, ed., *Sewall Diary*, 863-864, 1063.

ashamed of my Sin, and to loath my self for it.” He then appealed again to his fellow Puritans: “I put up a Note...[saying] Samuel Sewall, depriv’d of his dear Wife by a very sudden and awfull Stroke, desire Prayers that GOD would sanctify the same to himself, and Children, and family.”⁸³ Surely the shock of losing Abigail so quickly after their marriage was painful for Sewall and made him appeal to the wisdom of God when his mind could not comprehend or justify the tragic events that had transpired. Fortunately, Sewall’s third wife outlived him, so he was spared the calamity of losing a third wife, something not entirely uncommon among his contemporaries.

William Byrd and Samuel Sewall also thought and wrote about their own mortality, a fact which is not so curious when one comprehends how fully the fragility of life and the nearness of death were apparent to citizens of British colonial America. William Byrd, obviously concerned about his mental health as he grew older wrote on his sixty-sixth birthday in 1740, “God preserve my head and grant I may not lose my memory and sense.”⁸⁴ Death was often the subject of his dreams: “I dreamed a coffin was brought into my house and thrown into the hall,” he writes in 1712; three nights later he dreamt that a “mourning coach drove into my garden and stopped at the house door.”⁸⁵ Although the reader cannot be sure if Byrd felt that these dreams applied to him or someone in his household, they, at the very least, indicate his awareness of and anxiety about death. Certainly he was considering his own mortality when he made up his last will and testament in December of 1743, less than a year before his death. Although no signed and witnessed copy is extant, there is an unsigned copy that still exists. In it, Byrd remarks about his earthly remains and spiritual existence, saying: “As to my perishing body I entreat it may be

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 932, 950-951.

⁸⁴ Woodfin and Tinling, eds., *Another Secret Diary*, 50.

⁸⁵ Wright and Tinling, eds., *Secret Diary, 1709-1712*, 470, 472.

committed to its kindred earth...with a firm perswasion that my Redeemer lives, and will stand at the last day upon the earth.” He continues with a heavenly appeal for his family: “[I] recommed my widow and fatherless children to the mercifull Preovidence of God, to guard them from the wiles of the crafty, and the oppression of the powerfull, and to direct the conduct of their lives, [to] secure...his everlasting blessing and protection.”⁸⁶

Sewall also felt the proximity of his own mortality in his Puritan world. Sometimes Sewall expressed his concerns with a light heart, as when he writes, “Just as I sat down in my Seat, one of my Foreteeth in my under Jaw came out...This...does thereby give me warning that I must shortly resign my Head: The Lord help me to do it cheerfully!” However, at other times Sewall surely realized that the end was nearing and gave it serious thought. After the funeral of his classmate Peter Thacher in 1727, when Sewall was seventy-five, he wrote, “I have now been at the Interment of 4 of my Class-mates...Now I can go to more more Funerals of my Class-mates; nor none be at mine; for the survivors, [are] one Hundred Miles off, and are extremely enfeebled.” He continues, appealing to God in a moment of uncertainty, “I humbly pray that CHRIST may be graciously present with us all Three both in Life, and in Death, and then we shall safely and Comfortably walk through the shady valley that leads to Glory.” Almost a year later, in August of 1728, only a short time before his death, Sewall wrote, “My extraordinary Sickness of Flux and Vomiting the night after the 27. July quickened me to resign my places of Chief Justice and Judge of Probate...” He continued, commenting, “Pray that the Retirement and Leisure I am seeking for may be successfully improved in preparing for a better world.”⁸⁷ At the end, it seems, Sewall’s faith remained strong and his dedication resolute, according to his son Joseph’s diary, now lost, he “repeated...the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer” and “spake...of

⁸⁶ Tinling, ed., *Correspondence of Three William Byrds*, 598.

⁸⁷ Thomas, ed., *Sewall Diary*, 976, 1057, 1062.

looking to Jesus...the only remedy.”⁸⁸ As with other problems of the body and mind, Sewall took death in stride, seeking comfort and hope in his faith.

As we have seen, faith in God is what allowed William Byrd II, Samuel Sewall, and their contemporaries to understand and cope with the harsh world around them, a place in which illness and death were much closer, physically and mentally, than they are today. It is apparent that both Byrd and Sewall, regardless of their religious backgrounds and worldviews, shared a similar devotion to their faith. Byrd prayed almost daily, noting when he did not, and recorded it in his diary. Sewall’s diary is, as one might gather from the above excerpts, filled with exclamations of devotion and appeals to divine Providence. In a time where the natural world and the world of knowledge were relatively unknown quantities, this kind of faith sustained and aided men and women like those of the Sewall and Byrd families in their trying and often tragedy-filled lives.

Though the proximity of death made Byrd and Sewall turn to God, the ultimate cause for comfort, they still saw the goodness and logic of the divine in the world—from the work of their local physicians to the wondrous curatives ginseng and Peruvian bark. In spite of all the tragedy that surrounded them, Byrd and Sewall did not become entirely fatalistic, but instead took comfort in their faith. According to their early modern worldview, God had planned medical courses of action and allowed them to be implemented by humanity. Sewall and Byrd did not rely on prayer alone, then, and their beliefs and actions can be understood as a classic blend of the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian systems—for them, prayer, folk medicine, and emerging scientific theories coexisted easily. In their world, where most still believed in the power of magic and the reality of spiritual phenomena, this combination of the scientific, the theological,

⁸⁸ Strandness, *Sewall: A Puritan Portrait*, 187.

and the mythic made this integrated system viable and readily implemented by colonial citizens. The realities described in their writings reflect their place in the early modern world, ones consistent with their contemporaries in their “homeland,” England, and indeed most of Western Europe.⁸⁹

This worldview was built around the cycles of life—birth, childhood, adulthood, old age, and death—and the accompanying maladies and injuries that were intrinsically connected with them. The proximity and immediacy of mortality therefore permeated the lives of William Byrd and Samuel Sewall. With little or no scientific knowledge with which to make sense out of these occurrences, colonial men and women looked to practically the only comforting and reasoning agent they had available—their Christian religion. Byrd and Sewall’s diaries and other writings are what illuminate this unique relationship between faith and science, superstition and medical technology, and folk and high cultures that are hallmarks of the early modern world.

⁸⁹ See Irvine Loudon, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Western Medicine*, for context.

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